

Chapter 18

Hunter had no idea how long he'd been tied to the whipping posts when he heard his mother's voice drifting to his ears. He was hanging limply from the manacles, his shoulders screaming in protest at having to support his weight. But the pain in his shoulders was bearable compared to the pain of the lash. Bane seemed to be taken in by the charade and frequently stopped the lashes in an effort to "revive" him.

His mother's voice was coming closer and now he could hear her words as she spoke to the goblin.

"I'm impressed by your abilities," she said. "I would not have thought you could break him so quickly.

"He's still not fully broken," Bane answered. "I haven't been able to persuade him to sing for me yet."

She sighed with evident regret. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to deny you that pleasure for the time being. Finvarra's bastard has barricaded herself into her mother's house. She promises to give us the child if we let Hunter go." Bane made an ugly snorting sound, and the Queen laughed. "Yes, of course it is a

bluff. How she thinks she will manage to get Hunter safely into her house without being taken herself, I don't know. But I've a mind to humor her. The reunion should be quite . . . touching."

Hunter's sagging spirit revived a little. What was Kiera up to? Ice-cold fingers touched one of the open welts on his back and he had to fight the urge to shudder away from that touch.

"Your lady love isn't terribly bright, is she my son? After all, she will have to open her door and remove the wardings to let you in."

He made no reaction whatsoever to her words or her touch, hanging limply, his head lolling to his chest, his eyes half-closed. The Queen clucked her tongue.

"You disappoint me," she told him. "I thought you had more fortitude than this. At this rate, you will barely outlast your dear father, and he was nothing but a mortal."

The chains holding him up suddenly released. His reflexes urged him to stiffen his knees and support his weight, but he fought them and allowed himself to flop to the cold, blood-slicked flagstones below him. He moaned softly and stirred, as if barely clinging to consciousness.

"Well, we cannot show up on the little lady's doorstep with this pathetic specimen," the Queen said. "Chain his wrists and ankles, and we'll see if we can get him onto his feet."

Hunter's heart was beating steadily faster and it was becoming harder to fake his broken state. The Queen was entirely taken in by the act as, apparently, was Bane. The goblin, his clawed hands shielded by heavy leather gloves, fastened shackles onto Hunter's wrists and ankles. Hunter smelled a hint of iron in the air, and the shackles burned on his skin. Not as fiercely as pure iron might, but there was at least a trace of that hated metal in these chains. Through his half-closed eyes, he could see Bane wincing and baring his teeth, the gloves having only partially

protected him from the touch.

A short length of chain lay between those shackles—enough chain to serve Hunter well if he could just keep his excitement and hope under control.

“This will sting, my son,” the Queen said, her voice full of laughter.

Moments later, something splashed onto the wounds on his back. Every welt flamed back to life at once, the pain blinding him. It was all he could do not to scream, for it felt like she had poured acid on those open wounds. He was dimly aware of Bane’s chuckling, and he used his fury at the creature’s sadism to help keep himself under control.

Eventually, the pain started to fade. Hunter breathed deeply, his body now closer to real exhaustion. But he still had some strength in him. It would have to be enough.

A clawed hand grabbed his shoulder and turned him over onto his back. He fluttered his eyelids open and saw the Queen’s face hovering over him, a cruel smile on her blood-red lips. She bent so that her hair trailed over the naked flesh of his chest. His skin twitched as though trying to escape even that much contact with her. Not far behind her, Bane was leaning against one of the whipping posts, his arms and ankles crossed in a posture of smug confidence.

“I can’t believe I coddled such a mewling weakling for so long,” the Queen sneered, though her eyes gave every indication she was pleased with the situation. “It appears I will have to prepare a potion just to get you onto your feet.”

She started to rise, and he leapt into action.

Hunter launched himself upward, swinging his arms over the Queen’s head. She gave a cry of surprise, then fell forward onto

him when the chain between his wrists hit the back of her neck. At first, she was too startled to put up an effective resistance; then, it was too late.

Hunter spun her onto her back, wrapping the chain around her throat and stilling her kicking legs by trapping them with his own. He pulled hard on the chain and heard her breath coming in gasps, then not coming at all. Her hands clawed at his, but though her nails scoured his fingers, he did not loosen his grip. Bane was trying to get at him, but he kept turning and putting the Queen’s body between them.

She was weakening. Her fingers fell away from his hands, and her body slumped. Still, Hunter did not let up. What a fool he would feel if he fell for the same trick he himself had employed.

Bane had stopped trying to get at him, was now just standing there and staring. He shook his head. “You can let go now, Boyo. She’s dead.”

Hunter held on desperately, trying to feel for her heartbeat, but his own heart was thundering too hard. He didn’t dare let go until he was absolutely sure.

Bane unsheathed his knife. Hunter made sure to keep the Queen’s body between them as the goblin approached. But Bane for once wasn’t coming after him. The goblin stuck the point of his knife into the Queen’s foot. She did not move.

“See?” the goblin said. “She’s dead. Now let go.”

His body quivering with belated reaction, Hunter loosened his grip and allowed her body to slide off of him and onto the ground. She showed no hint of life, her eyes open and staring, her thin neck circled with welts and burns. Hunter looked up, expecting to see Bane’s knife coming his direction. Instead, the goblin resheathed it and pulled a ring of keys from his belt.

Hunter thought perhaps he had slipped into a dream. Bane gingerly unlocked the shackles at his feet, then handed him a pair of pants. Hunter hadn't even noticed the pile of clothing that the Queen had brought to dress him in. Keeping a wary and very puzzled eye on the goblin, he pulled them on. Bane showed no inclination to remove the shackles from Hunter's wrists.

"Hurry up," Bane grunted, grabbing hold of Hunter's arm and tugging the moment his zipper was up.

Hunter stumbled and almost fell, for his hands were still shackled. Bane continued to drag him along. Hunter got his feet back under him, and Bane broke into a jog. Hunter matched his pace, and Bane let go of his arm.

"What the hell are you doing?" Hunter asked, shaking his head to try to clear the fog.

"Getting the hell out of here, what do you think?"

Hunter followed him into a tunnel that led under the palace. Behind them in the courtyard, a cry of alarm split the air.

"Damn!" Bane cried, grabbing Hunter's arm again. "Hurry, you worthless piece of shit!"

The jog turned into an all-out run. When Hunter tried to slow the pace, the goblin dug his claws into his arm. Deciding he would try to make sense out of this later, Hunter followed. The cries behind them multiplied, and an alarm bell started clanging. Bane cursed, but kept running, leading Hunter through tunnels and passages he never knew existed. Once, they almost rushed headlong into a goblin patrol, but Bane pulled up just in time. They pressed themselves into a pool of shadow as the patrol hurried down the hall, undoubtedly mustered to capture the Queen's murderer.

Eventually, they emerged from the palace and plunged into

the Unseelie forest. The thick brambles and thorns forced them to slow down.

Hunter followed without protest for the better part of an hour, thorns shredding his bare feet. They had to be nearing the Seelie border by now, and still Bane showed no sign of letting up. Hunter came to an abrupt halt. Bane continued on for a couple of steps before he realized Hunter had failed to follow.

"Okay," Hunter said, "I think it's time you explain yourself."

The goblin paused in his headlong flight and took a few steps closer, his lips turned into a familiar sneer. "You really are a moron, Prince."

"Hey, I'm not the one who fell for the 'I'm too weak to be any danger' ruse."

"Exactly."

"Huh?"

"See if you can work this out: I guard the Queen. You killed the Queen. I was supposed to be guarding her when you killed her. Therefore . . ."

When he put it that way, Hunter couldn't help but understand. "Therefore you're headed for execution."

Bane clapped, his lips still curled away from his teeth. "Give the boy a gold star."

"And you're helping me escape why?"

"Let's get over the border, and then we can continue this discussion, eh Boyo? Too risky to stand still here." He turned his back without awaiting an answer, plunging on through the underbrush.

Hunter was beginning to put things together himself, but he followed along in silence. About fifteen minutes later, they broke through the thick Unseelie forest into Seelie territory. Bane

continued to run until they'd put a healthy distance between themselves and the border, stopping finally in a small clearing bathed in moonlight.

Hunter was winded and still weak from the torture. His lacerated feet throbbed with every step. When Bane came to a stop, Hunter bent over and put his hands on his knees, sides heaving. The goblin did not give him much time to recover his breath, however.

Hunter straightened when Bane drew his knife.

"Let's have it out, shall we Prince?" the goblin said.

"Let's see: you have a big knife. I'm unarmed. You're fresh and strong. I'm weakened by torture. And, oh yes, my hands are shackled together! With iron shackles, even. I guess this means you're too much of a coward to risk a fair fight."

Bane laughed, though there was a bitter edge to that laughter. "If the Queen's forces find me—and I have no doubt she'll send them hunting for me as soon as she's corporeal again—I will die in far more pain than you just suffered. But, see, I know that's not how I'm destined to die. So I figure this unfair advantage of mine ain't gonna do me any good in the end."

Hunter stared at the goblin. Damned if, despite his long association with them, he *still* didn't understand these Unseelie creatures. "So because you think it's your fate to die by my hand, you helped me escape the Unseelie Court when you could have just saved your own hide, and now you're going to fight me when you could just walk away. Ever heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy?"

Bane shook his head. "You don't get it, but by now that shouldn't surprise me. Let me explain in little bitty words so you can understand. If I walk away, they'll catch me eventually. They

catch me, I die and it's ugly. So instead, I bring you with me. We fight, I die quick. Get it?"

Hunter snorted. "You could do it yourself, you know. That's what I was going to do, before Kiera gave me reason to do otherwise."

"Not as satisfying as finally being able to fight you without the Queen's damned muzzle. Besides, there's always the chance I might take you with me. Now enough talk."

The goblin charged.

Hunter barely managed to deflect Bane's blade with the chain between his hands. Sparks flew, lighting the night. Bane growled deep in his throat and tried another thrust. Hunter dodged, wishing he had his own knife. He could only defend for so long before he would have to find some kind of effective attack. He backed away, crouched and ready for action. Bane followed, feinting.

"Now who's the coward?" the goblin taunted as Hunter continued to back up.

Hunter didn't answer, his eyes fixed on the blade, waiting for Bane to make another charge. He didn't have long to wait. He met the knife with his chained hands once more, twisting the chain around the blade and yanking hard while snapping a kick at Bane's mid-section. Goblins were not as weak around the middle as humans, but Bane nevertheless tried to avoid the kick. The distraction cost him his knife. Hunter would have liked to grab it himself, but as he tried to unwrap the chain, the knife fell to the ground—narrowly missing his foot. Then Bane slammed into him and Hunter went down hard.

Claws dug deeply into his shoulders, and Bane's foul breath washed over his face. The goblin bared his formidable fangs, and

Hunter barely got his hands up in time to stop those fangs from tearing out his throat. It took most of his strength to hold the goblin at bay. He considered letting go and catching Bane's neck in the chain, but the goblin's throat would not be as fragile as the Queen's and Hunter doubted he'd have the strength to strangle him. He shuddered in revulsion as drool dripped onto his face.

Bane was putting all his strength into the effort to bite, and Hunter's arms were weakening. Hunter gathered his remaining strength to roll them over. Bane lost the advantage of leverage, but his claws still dug into Hunter's shoulders, and Hunter still had no effective way to attack. Bane grinned fiercely at him then raked his claws through his upper arms.

Pinning the goblin would do Hunter no good, so he sprang to his feet and swiftly backpedaled. His foot hit a rock and, cursing, he fell once more. He rolled sharply to the side to avoid the goblin's pounce. When the roll came to a stop, Hunter put his hand down to push himself to his feet.

His hand came down on the hilt of Bane's knife. His fingers curled around it even as a strange chill passed over him. He'd put no stock in Bane's supposed premonition, but the knife certainly gave him an advantage. But truly Bane *couldn't* know what was going to happen. That would suggest that neither Bane nor Hunter had any free will in the matter, and that was not something Hunter was prepared to accept.

Hunter brandished the knife as Bane crouched for another spring. Bane snarled loudly, flexing his claws.

"Let's see if I can give you something to remember me by," he said, then charged again, claws extended.

Hunter jabbed with the knife as Bane's claws slashed across his forearm, leaving deep furrows. The knife sank into the

goblin's mid-section, and he howled. Hunter jerked the knife out and moved away, crouched and ready in case Bane should come at him again. But the goblin had fallen to his knees and now clutched his belly. Hunter could see blood gushing from the wound. Bane tried to stand up again, launching himself in Hunter's direction. Hunter stepped back, and Bane collapsed before he'd crossed even half the distance between them.

Hunter bent and wiped the blade against a patch of grass, cleaning the goblin blood off as best he could. His shoulders and forearm burned and stung from the deep scratches, but after all the pain he'd suffered, these wounds were barely an annoyance.

Turning his back on Bane, he got his bearings and headed off toward the faerie circle that would take him back to the mortal world.

"No!" Bane yelled. "Wait!"

Hunter turned and saw the goblin, still clutching his oozing belly, trying to crawl after him. When he saw he had Hunter's attention, Bane collapsed back into the grass, his ribs heaving with his effort.

"They can heal this," Bane said. "If they catch me. You've got to finish what you started."

Hunter stared at the goblin incredulously. "Oh do I? It seems to me I can do whatever I please. And it pleases me to walk away." To hell with his supposed destiny! Almost as long as he could remember, he'd wanted to kill Bane. Now that the chance presented itself, he didn't have it in him to kill him in cold blood. In anger, he could have done it. But not like this. Once more he turned his back.

"You can't leave me like this!"

Hunter told himself to keep walking, but almost against his

will he came to a stop.

“You know what they’ll do to me if they catch me alive,” the goblin said. “I know you hate me, but you wouldn’t condemn me to that fate. So kill me. You’ve wanted to ever since I did your dear daddy, so just go ahead and do it.”

Hunter approached his wounded nemesis, a war raging within him. “Maybe you’ll get lucky and bleed to death before they find you.”

“No. You’ll kill me. I told you, I know how it ends.”

Hunter snorted. “Hate to tell you this, but you’re wrong.”

Bane shook his head. He was grimacing in pain, but Hunter told himself he had no pity in his heart for this creature’s pain, not when he’d caused so much pain to so many himself.

“You don’t understand, Hunter.” Hunter actually started at hearing his name in Bane’s voice. “We’re Unseelie, you and me. We don’t get a choice in this shit. We just follow our scripts.”

“No!” Hunter snapped. “I believe in free will. There’s no such thing as fate.”

“There is if you’re Unseelie.”

Unbidden to his mind came Kiera’s dear voice, suggesting that maybe he wasn’t really Unseelie after all. He’d dismissed the idea at the time. Now, he wasn’t so sure. “Maybe that’s true. But I’m not Unseelie.” He let the knife drop.

For the first time, he saw a flicker of genuine worry in Bane’s eyes. “What could be more Unseelie than condemning someone to death by torture?”

“Nice try. But you richly deserve it.”

Bane’s eyes closed and he lay still, one clawed hand digging into the grass while the other lay clapped over the wound. Hunter couldn’t help noticing that the bleeding seemed to have slowed.

He told himself to get the hell out of here. He remembered the pain he’d suffered at Bane’s hands, remembered how much the goblin had gloated and enjoyed it. He held in his mind the image of his father’s anguished face as lash after lash fell. If ever a creature deserved to die painfully more than Bane, Hunter had never heard of him.

He forced a step backward, then another. Bane opened his eyes and stared at him. The goblin offered no further persuasion, save for that stare.

Damn it! Hunter was *not* Unseelie! He had free will, could do whatever he wanted. All he had to do to prove that to himself was walk away.

Hunter swallowed hard, feeling something akin to panic. What would Kiera say if he told her he’d allowed his nemesis to be slowly tortured to death? Would she be impressed with this proof that he was not Unseelie?

The answer was obvious.

Hunter uttered a series of curses as he bent to retrieve the knife. Bane let out a loud sigh of relief. Hunter halted just out of reach.

“What guarantee do I have that you’re not going to attack me? Looks like the bleeding’s slowing down. You probably have more strength than you’re letting on.”

Bane shrugged and struggled up into a sitting position, grimacing in pain. “I won’t attack you, Prince. I’m ready to go. But if you want assurances . . .” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, tossing them at Hunter’s feet. “Take the manacles off and give them to me. I’ll put them on if it’ll make you get on with it.”

Hunter bent to pick up the keys. He unlocked the manacles,

gratefully letting them drop to the ground at his feet, then turned to the goblin.

“Tell you what, Bane,” he said, “I’ll just leave this knife of yours right here.” He jammed the blade into the ground. “What you do with it after I’m gone is no business of mine.”

Bane looked almost comically perplexed, but uttered no argument as Hunter walked away.

Hunter managed to walk maybe two or three hundred yards before five Daoine Sidhe warriors stepped out from behind the trees aiming silver-tipped arrows at his heart.